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RELIGION IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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This paper, presented for my Master of Theology, reflects what I feel have been the most important learning experiences in this year of study. It is a composite of portions of papers from three courses completed in the Fall Semester, 1988: Sin, Grace and Growth (RLTP 710m - Dr. James Fowler); God and Suffering (RLTS 710k - Dr. Noel Erskine); The Church's Mission in a Pluralistic World (M 303 - Dr. Thomas Thangaraj); and one course I am currently enrolled in, Feminist Theologies (ST 349 - Dr. Rebecca Chopp). These portions of those papers have been molded together with revisions and additions to touch three specific areas of concern:

- the role of American Culture in shaping a religion that struggles through "individualism", in its effort to identify with those who suffer;
- redemption from sin's domination (in Dorothee Soelle) that can liberate us toward solidarity;
- the potential of "vision" in feminist theology to help re-shape the theology of American culture's religion.

Although these three concerns evolve explicitly in this paper out of the four courses mentioned above, there is at the very least the implicit impact of my other courses: Character and Story in Christian Ethics (ES 375 - Dr. Richard Bondi); Trends in Ecumenical Theology (M 315 - Dr. Thomas Thangaraj); The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. (ST 359 - Dr. Noel Erskine); and Studies in Islam: The Qur'an (RLTS 735 - Dr. Jane McAuliffe). Each has played a vital role in helping to reshape my understanding of my own theological position.

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## Preface

As I projected my year of study in Religion in Culture I was particularly interested in the impact of women on that Religion. There is probably little argument that the Christian Faith, as we know it in the United States today, is a patriarchal institution, created, administered and given its theology by men. Despite the massive numbers of women who have provided the working backbone of the Church, it is an institution whose words both come from men and express the way men perceive faith.

Is there something special and different that women have to say to this faith? Is there also a significant story that has not been adequately told about the role of women in the Church's history? Can the Church ever become what it should be if it never fully incorporates women into its doctrinal and ecclesiastical leadership? Can a Church so deeply rooted in patriarchal leadership, with a theology ranging from radical explicit sexism to implicit, subliminal sexist theological orientation, become a Church responsive to the growing feminist challenge?

These types of questions must be asked. More than that, they must be answered. In answering them the Church can take several significant steps. It can acknowledge that it hears these questions. It can take seriously the nature and importance of those questions and of those who ask them. It can seek to draw in rather than shut out those who are asking the Church to engage itself and its culture in a quest to define and seek a new vision of society based on the highest premises of the Christian faith. We must remember that wherever there are people



oppressed for any reason; race, politics, religious beliefs, economics, there are women among them. Perhaps then women's issues are posing questions that challenge the very foundation of all active and passive support of oppression, not only in American Culture, but in the whole of human society.

## I. The Impact of American Culture on the Formation of Its Religion

There is a certain arrogance that comes from personal and theological centering on the individual. A nation, carved out of a relatively unchartered wilderness by rough individuals tends to take on the characteristic of its people. The faith brought to this nation by those individuals was also shaped as that nation was created. I have chosen to wrestle with how that shaping affected its religious view of suffering because suffering necessarily causes us to consider certain other elements of theology: justice, mercy and worth. The way we understand justice, mercy and worth with regard to suffering has a major impact on our ability to be in solidarity with those who do suffer. With this in mind I offer this brief summary of the formation of the Religion of America.

I suppose that Western Christian faith vacillates somewhere between Augustine and Aquinas. With Augustine the complexity of the creation, or plenitude necessarily affords an origin of evil within creation. It serves as the challenge through which good emerges. Evil becomes the means by which one becomes good. Aquinas proposes that corruption is the consequence of an orderly universe which in its plenitude allows corruption. This corruption, stemming from complexity allows for sin. According to Aquinas, God causes evil as penalty for corruption. The evil of fault remains in the creature.<sup>1</sup>



When we add a dose or two of Thomism and Calvinism we see the ambiguity of a God who both causes sin through the nature of creation, and is given escape by attributing fault or moral responsibility to humankind. Even Karl Barth's "shadowside" of existence gives way to an evil that is in enmity with God and is shown in sin.<sup>2</sup>

With this evolution of the origin and nature of evil and sin, where does a new nation find a theodicy. It came into being as the French Revolution is fermenting, and while it was struggling with its own guilt of slavery, an institution which tinged the armor of personal liberty exemplified in its own casting off of oppression by Great Britain.

American culture, as impressive as it can be, has evolved out of a "bootstrap" mentality. Early religious pilgrims came to find a place away from the religious persecution of home. (Although not particularly with the thought of establishing an environment of free expression for all!) Early settlers, pioneers and "ne'er do wells" from debtors prisons created a new aristocracy beaming with pride at its conquering of a new land and its native people. Fresh off its own battle for freedom it fought an internal battle which scarred it for life. True to form, it rose up, became a world power, surpassed nations with far deeper roots with its industry, trade and military power. They took on the world and won!

During this time a rising theologian was searching for an ideal faith, nearly "Hauerwasian" (Stanley Hauerwas, AGAINST THE NATIONS, and other works) in nature. In discussing the role of the United States in the world Ernest Lefever described that theologian in these words: "His understanding of the crises has taken on added meaning as it became





increasingly apparent that history had confirmed upon the United States the major responsibility for defending the cherished values of Western Civilization."<sup>3</sup> This theologian was Reinhold Niebuhr. Lefever's reference to Niebuhr speaks to us of the movement Niebuhr made from the ideal to the practical. Although acknowledged as a major theologian of the American faith, Niebuhr will become important later in this paper in helping provide us with some answers to the problem faith in the American culture has with suffering.

Dorothee Soelle, the German liberation theologian reviews several traditional concepts of suffering that include: suffering as a "test"; suffering as punishment for sin; suffering sent to teach strength through adversity; and, suffering as atonement for sin. Within these ideas that suffering is "divine chastisement", Soelle suggests there is the implication that "...human weakness....serves to demonstrate divine strength." She refers to this "theological sadism" as "worshipping the executioner."<sup>4</sup>

Soelle goes on to identify two characteristics of the faith of American culture that obscure its vision of suffering. The first is "Christian Masochism" which identifies all suffering as the result of sin, and therefore justifies the suffering of oppression in "Third World" countries even as it legitimizes continued oppression by "blessed nations". After all, if they quit sinning God will lift their suffering! Secondly, she sees an apathy or unconcern in America that is incapable of suffering, thus preventing empathy or solidarity with those who suffer. Sympathy is, after all, a more natural response than solidarity for the virtuous. She suggests this lack of concern is due to the fact that American culture is too fruitful and too sophisticated,





thereby muting the efforts of even our own oppressed to lift the causes of other oppressed peoples.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, several thousand years ago people asked "How can God who is so good, impose evil on his/her people?" The writer of the Biblical Story of Job told a story of a cosmic conversation that led to a wager between God and the Devil. It presented the absurdity of the idea that God sends suffering in retribution for sins. This absurdity is further evidenced in the suggestions by his friends that surely his sins brought about his suffering, and that Job must surely have always expected God to reward him for his faithfulness. In the end, the question of why evil people prosper and good people suffer is still there. If sin isn't directly related to suffering and prosperity isn't always related to righteousness, what then?

As sophisticated concepts of evil began to evolve, much of it was directed at one or both of the following; absolving God, or blaming humans. That is, if God does impose suffering it must be because of sin. Perhaps more confusing was the idea that God sends suffering to test us, to make us strong through our adversity. Somewhat more palatable was the idea that God did not directly cause suffering and evil. They are the by-products of compossibility or plenitude in creation. The freedom God gave in creation implies a freedom to fail as well as to succeed. Stain, fallenness and fault, somehow inherent in humanity, make our sin inevitable.

The fact is, here we are today, still trying to answer the question of suffering. Meanwhile, the churches of the American culture say "We've got Robert Schuler (our own brand of religious dianetics), and in the main we are prospering. We have not been defeated (Vietnam



never counts!), occupied or colonized. We will certainly not jeopardize that for the sake of some religious ideology that calls for us to challenge something that's working so well. Besides, "If God really cared about the oppressed they would be set free, wouldn't they?" After all, we are the "last great hope of God."

This failure to assimilate Job's argument that God does not send suffering as the result of sin has characterized American religious faith and prevented, for the most part, a sense of solidarity with the oppressed and suffering of the world. I will close this part of the paper with a few questions.

1. To what degree has "bootstrap" mentality created an arrogance which has no place in the Christian faith?
2. Is our preoccupation with militarism in a time of peace a holding on to the strongest vestiges of patriarchal influence both here and abroad?
3. Is there a need for at least a sectarian (if necessary) identification of Christians with other Christians that would challenge American priorities?
4. Will the Church of the American culture survive the individualism of its basic character and become the compassionate and active arm of God in the world?
5. Can such an escape occur without a redefining of mission and ministry?

Does Reinhold Niebuhr provide some answers?

"...(T)he Christian conception of the relation of historic justice to the love of the Kingdom of God is a dialectic one. Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history. Or expressed from the opposite standpoint, the achievements of justice in history may rise in indeterminate degrees to find their fulfillment in a more perfect love and brotherhood (sic); but each



new level of fulfillment also contains elements which stand in contradiction to perfect love. There are therefore obligations to realize justice in indeterminate degrees; but none of the realizations can assure the serenity of perfect fulfillment. If we analyze the realities of history in terms of this formula it will throw light on aspects of history which would otherwise remain obscure and perplexing; and will obviate mistakes which are inevitably made under alternative interpretations. Higher realizations of historic justice would be possible if it were more fully understood that all such realizations contain contradictions to, as well as approximations of, the ideal love. Sanctification in the realm of social relations demands recognition of the impossibility of perfect sanctification.<sup>6</sup>

If Reinhold Niebuhr was the "Golden Boy" (emphasis mine) of American religion in the mid-twentieth century, he must also be seen for his role in discerning how certain elements that impacted the development of that religion can be used to move it toward solidarity with those who suffer. He would consider it vital that we understand the influence that Calvin and Luther had on the faith, and how these theologians can be used to reshape that same faith.

The lengthy quote above from THE NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN, Volume II, provides the basis for a theology of solidarity which evolves out of his critique of the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformations. There exists, at least for Niebuhr, in both these theologians the real possibility of a love and justice connection that is obscured because of what Niebuhr considers the love-justice dialectic.<sup>7</sup>

"Thus from faith flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a cheerful willing free spirit, disposed to serve our neighbor voluntarily, without taking into account any gratitude or ingratitude,





praise or blame, gain or loss."(emphasis added)<sup>8</sup> Niebuhr illustrates the potential in Luther for a love evolving out of God's grace, that would seem to suggest that Christians should naturally gravitate toward those who suffer regardless of the cause of their suffering. "I will stick by you without reservations or conditions....because you are there, because you need me."<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately what evolved out of this, and thus into the theology that permeated the religious faith of the early American settlers was a "Lutheran fear of action, because it may tempt to a new pride."<sup>10</sup>

Niebuhr's criticism of Calvin is similar in that Calvin shares a negative view of humanity that would indict any efforts at good works on account of the human stain and imperfection necessarily inherent in those actions. "Both sides of the Reformation ....regarded the problem of justice as insoluble by reason of human sinfulness..."<sup>11</sup>

The impact of Calvin and Luther on American religion must be recognized if we are to plot a course toward a revised theology of solidarity with those who suffer. How can we care if our very faith says we are too stained to do anything worthwhile about suffering anyway? This theological defeatism combines neatly with what Dorothee Soelle calls "Post Christian Apathy"<sup>12</sup> to legitimize American disinterest in suffering while theologically deconscientizing its practitioners.

Niebuhr suggests a recovering of the "...doctrine of justification by faith...(as) a release of the soul into action."<sup>13</sup> In this way the dialectic between the perfect nature of love and the imperfect structures of justice becomes the tool for promoting solidarity rather than being its obstacle. If one can sense that justification through



faith allows the imperfection of works as legitimate expression of Christian love in response to suffering, then even "stained" humans can, with theological sanction, involve themselves in efforts to alleviate suffering.

However imperfect they may be, "Systems of justice are the servants and instruments of brotherhood (sic) in so far as they extend the sense of obligation towards the other..." through the following: "immediately felt obligation prompted by obvious need, to a continued obligation expressed in fixed principles of mutual support", from both "simple" and "...complex relations of the self" to others; and "from the obligations, discerned by the individual self, to the wider obligations which the community defines from its more impartial view."<sup>14</sup>

He goes on to say that "In these three ways rules and laws of justice stand in a positive relation to the law of love."<sup>15</sup> However imperfect, those concepts of justice that lead us toward solidarity with those who suffer do relate to that "law of love". Thus to the American Christian Niebuhr would say:

The need of...neighbor, the demands of that social situation, the claims of this life upon me, unrecognized today may be recognized and stir the conscience to uneasiness tomorrow. There is a constantly increasing sense of social obligation which is an integral part of the life of grace."<sup>16</sup>

If then, as our look at Job suggested, suffering is not retribution God metes out for sinfulness; and if, despite Lutheran and Calvinist implications, efforts to relieve suffering can and should be practiced, do we have any more to suggest about resolving the apathy of American religion in general toward suffering? The answer is...YES!



The feminist theologian Lynn Nell Rhodes sees the role of white females as a pivotal one between context and vision. White women are both the oppressed ("unpaid labor in the reproductive system and....surplus labor in the productive system.")<sup>17</sup>, and the oppressors. White women share in the corporate guilt of racism and oppression while being themselves the oppressed. The role of women in the evolving theology of America has the potential to help move the Church toward more solidarity with and involvement in the suffering masses of the world. Women bring to theological attitudes the gifts of caring, nurture and emotional involvement which although apparently evident in the life of Jesus, have been played down by both a faith and a culture dominated by male attitudes of power and dominance.

Finally, we look to Orlando Costas for one more viewpoint. Costas proposes that one purpose of Church Growth (that area so very vulnerable to the propagation of paternalism and self righteous theology) must be "...the restoration of humanity and the cosmos to its vocation: a new creation." Costa continues, "He (Jesus) therefore links his mission to those who demonstrate most graphically the tragedy of sin: the poor - those who have nothing and no one to help them and to meet their needs; the captives - those whose liberty has been mutilated; the blind - those for whom it is physically impossible to contemplate and enjoy the good things of creation; the oppressed - those who have been enslaved and domesticated by other human beings."<sup>18</sup>

Obviously there exists in the biblical traditions both the attitudes for solidarity with those who suffer, and the vision of a more just world with fewer structures that promote it. From Niebuhr to feminist and liberation theologians, there are those who would try to





point us toward the vision of a Church better structured to involve its people with those who suffer.

Rhodes and Costas have linked "salvation", "vision" and "a new creation" as inseparable parts of a faith and theological change that could challenge American Religion to move toward solidarity with the oppressed. Dorothee Soelle re-examines basic concepts of sin, evil and redemption from a feminist/liberation point of view. She begins at the creation story and moves on through to Paul's concept of redemption (especially in Romans 6) with significant re-interpretations. Whereas Rhodes and Costas offer new frontiers of understanding for the American Religious community, Soelle digs into certain basic doctrines that have already shaped our theology, and then challenges our understanding of those doctrines. Her move from redemption to liberation offers an important challenge to the individualistic attitude of the salvation experience espoused by much of the American Religious community. (I admit that this understanding of salvation is not as prevalent now. However, it has greatly shaped American Religion and is still a very vital part of it.)

## II. Dorothee Soelle: A Feminist/Liberation Look at Sin, Evil and Redemption

Perhaps there is no better place to start considering sin, evil and redemption in Soelle than at the beginning. The beginning I have in mind, though, is not at the point of her earliest theological works. It is instead in a sermon she preached in the University Worship Service at St. Catherine's Church, Hamburg, Germany, on December 9, 1979.





Virtually the entire worship service is included, along with congregational reaction, in the tenth chapter of her book THE STRENGTH OF THE WEAK. She preached on the story of creation, but with a significant twist. This sermon, indeed the whole worship service, is important to our effort to discover the nature of sin, evil and redemption in her theology.

During one of the readings before the sermon, one of the readers recalls the Genesis 2 account of woman created for man, after man, as a helper to him, and plucked from his body evoking images of "...spare ribs, pork chops, slaughterhouses...", to which the other reader responds "Yuck". Soelle then recalls Paul (I Corinthians 11:7-9) and Timothy (I Timothy 2:11-14) speaking of "...woman...(as) the glory of man...", made for him, and, that "...she is to keep silence for Adam as born first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor."<sup>19</sup>

Soelle then reinterprets the creation in light of Genesis 3. Eve becomes the initiator. She is the one who risks "the chance of becoming guilty" in order to begin "living as a human being".<sup>20</sup> Soelle notes that from that time on the female is no longer referred to as "woman" (from man), but as "Eve", the "mother of all who live."<sup>21</sup>

That Eve is the initiator of life outside the stagnation (they had everything, they needed nothing) of "paradise", becomes an important symbol for Soelle's theology. Here "Eve" is not the symbol for the entrance of sin into the world. She is the "mother of all who live." She is the one who discovers the pleasures of food, wisdom and sexuality. (They saw their nakedness - no wonder God found them in the bushes!) They are sent out of the limits of the garden into the



possibilities of the world. This becomes for Soelle the real beginning of the human person through self awareness. Like the "coming out" of Gay liberation, Adam and Eve see themselves as they really are; "...they discover the joy of learning, the pleasures of beauty and knowledge....Without Eve we would be still sitting in the trees. Without her curiosity we would not know what knowledge was."22

But what of sin, evil and redemption? And what of God's curse on Adam to earn his living by the sweat of his brow, and on Eve to bear children in pain? I'll come back to the specific nature of sin, evil and redemption. As for work and childbearing, Soelle has grave problems seeing these as punishments. That is more "...what our tradition has selected out of this story and made use of." They are the evidence that "Freedom has its price." Soelle sees pain and oppression that follows the journey out of Eden as "...realities of peasant life in Palestine."23

Soelle suggests that the potential for sin and evil exists in the new world Adam and Eve found outside Eden. But, they exist within the quest for being. To claim our identity as knowledgeable, sexual and feeling beings (partakers of the tree of knowledge), we must throw ourselves into the quest for meaning. And Soelle reminds us that as God cast us out of Eden, so God followed us out into the new life.

The way Soelle evolves the concept of human potential out of the creation account makes it a little more difficult to draw out her theological understanding of sin, evil and redemption. This difficulty is increased by a second facet of her theology that evolves out of this view of the creation story. She is reluctant, in fact refuses, to buy into Martin Luther's concept of sin and redemption in individualistic



terms, and even less willing to align herself with his negative concept of human potential. Although she is not purely corporate in her concept of salvation, she is relational. Sin and evil exist in relationships between individuals more than as entities themselves. Sin then becomes "...estrangement of men and women from themselves."<sup>24</sup> Evil would be the attitudes and structures that create estrangement. "Sin is an expression of being cut off from life, of universal disorder."<sup>25</sup>

### Sin and Evil in Estrangement

"Sin is an expression of being cut off from life, of universal disorder."<sup>26</sup> This disconnectedness, when of our own choice, can become sin in the form of injustice, as sin that rules over us and which may claim our lives if we feel we can remain ambivalent or disinterested. Soelle would say that we are either tools or foes of injustice. "... (T)here is no neutrality... between despair/sin on the one hand and practice/faith on the other."<sup>27</sup>

Whereas sin is the brokenness we live as the result of our culture, it may be appropriate to recognize briefly that Soelle sees grace as the positive side of hope and certainty. That we can overcome and live as Christ would have us live, in the free spirit of rebellion against our "trappedness", and reject the disconnectedness of estrangement is also to reject what she says Hegel calls "non-reconciliation".<sup>28</sup> For Soelle, even grace is necessarily related to connectedness.

If there is in Soelle "original sin", it would most likely relate to the desire to remain in the estrangement or disconnected security of





Eden. The refusal to leave that apparent security may be the root of sin. However, the contextual nature of a "...predominant compulsion to sin in a particular society.."29, necessary to her definition of "original sin", draws even that piece of her theology back into the realm of "connectedness". "Original sin" cannot be defined for Soelle outside the societal claims on human life.

Sin as estrangement from brother or sister is likened by Soelle to the story from John's Gospel (John 5:1-9). A man lies by the side of the pool waiting for an angel to trouble the waters so that he might go down into the pool and be healed. When Jesus asks him why he waits, he says he had no one to put him into the water. Soelle says he is not "...aware of the simple connection between sickness and having no one."30 Sin is disconnectedness.

Soelle tells the story of Mrs. K and Mrs. S to illustrate how the structures of disconnectedness can create an atmosphere of sin. Although it is a rather simple story, Soelle's concern is to exegete its theological implications. Mrs. K fled with her husband from rural Pomerania to the large urban center of Hamburg. When her husband died she lost her ties to family and heritage. She refused to get close to anyone where she worked. She collected rent from her boarders without even letting them in her door. "Work is all we've got", Soelle would have her say.<sup>31</sup> Her rituals are her work, her occasional shopping and collecting rent checks.

Mrs. S lives in a small town with one of her daughters. All her other children live in the same small town. She attends mass regularly. She has a sense of connectedness. Her rituals include worship, family dinners and discussions of concern for neighbors who have had



difficulty. Mrs. S would see something wrong and ask if it ought to be that way. She would vote and be involved in the political process. Mrs. K can't get involved. Her apartment, her job, her shopping: that's all she's got.

How is this sin? For Soelle the disconnectedness and isolation are sin. There is no transcendence in Mrs. K. She never leaves her security to risk. Mrs. S cares and acts. In essence, for Soelle Mrs. K illustrates evil in structures, and sin in her personal inability, or unwillingness to leave "paradise", risk suffering and pain, in order to become. "Religion is a form of rebelling against individual and institutionalized banality."<sup>32</sup>

Similar to the sin of "disconnectedness" is "less connectedness". Urbane technological society makes it easier to be isolated. We work here, we live there. We do not relate to our community. We detach ourselves from our work at prescribed hours. Divorce and remarriage involve less suffering because "less connectedness" makes it easy to find "new connectedness", with little depth, little love, little involvement. This unwillingness to invest in connectedness lessens the amount of suffering and pain we have to face. Sin is thus compounded in that we are prevented from transcending, from plunging into a life of meaning. We retreat into the garden where pain, suffering and controversy are distant.<sup>33</sup>

Again Soelle is dealing with a dynamic of sin and structures. She would not deny the quality of good that does exist in individuals who live within such a society. She would point, however, to the potential for the sin of isolation by insulation of such a society.

Sin, then, for Soelle "...is not primarily a question of the



violation of individual commandments. It is a life under a different God....whom the New Testament calls mammon."<sup>34</sup> Here Soelle widens her split with the German Lutheran sense of individual sin and separation from God in favor of an understanding of sin as separation, or estrangement, from sister and brother. This separation may be the result of the imposition of sinful constraints as well as the willingness of the individual to live within those constraints. Sin is thus found in both "...a power which dominates" the sinner, and "...the people who have permitted that domination."<sup>35</sup>

Sin as estrangement? Soelle tells the story of a neighbor disturbed by scratch marks children made on his property. "This house is all we have", he says. Soelle responds, "(T)his man was dead. He had died from no longer having any kind of relationship with another human being."<sup>36</sup> She further illustrates this by referring to Luke's story of the prodigal son. (Luke 15) The son who left home and family wound up destitute, begging for scraps of food. He lived with the swine. He had no human relationships. This is why the father called him his son "...who once was dead (but) is now alive. Death is the wages of sin, the consequence of inauthentic life....(so) estranged from others that we can trust no one."<sup>37</sup>

### *Sin, Redemption and Liberation*

"According to the classical theological interpretation sin is always both fate and guilt....Instead of describing sin in its concrete historical manifestations, as the power that dominates our life, we have seen primal evil, radical evil, as an unconquerable enemy and have failed to make a more precise analysis of historical conditions."<sup>38</sup>





How has sin interpreted in this way prevented liberation? What the apostle Paul speaks of as sin becomes power which reigns over us (Romans 6), Soelle understands as a collective phenomenon. It is her belief that the theological mentality that makes this overthrowing of sin a purely individualistic matter has been the culprit in leading the Christian faith to absolve itself from responsibility for world conditions. It is a pessimism about human nature that contrasts with what she learned from Hegel. It separates the individual and the church from responsibility for evil social conditions because "...man (sic) is wicked by nature and is so in every conceivable society."<sup>39</sup>

It is in this context that I see Soelle's understanding of sin derived from a "humanocentric theism" consistent within the community of liberation theologians. (ie., James Cone, Gustavo Gutiérrez, William Jones and others) It is a theology far more concerned with meaning in human interaction than in discovering "the essence of life".(emphasis mine) It is a love and responsiveness to God that finds its nature induced out of the collective human situation. It is not an "anthropologizing" of God so much as it is seeking an understanding of God in the deepest and highest potentialities of love and human connectedness.

To truly understand how Soelle moves from sin to redemption we must understand what she means by "Social Darwinism".<sup>40</sup> When the structures of sin impose their power on us we come to believe we cannot change life. We are then confirmed in our wish to make our peace with God through the rituals of a faith that allows a "disconnected



righteousness".(emphasis mine) If we cannot change our own evil nature, if we cannot change the power of evil over the world, then we must find a way to proclaim ourselves as individually redeemed. Confession, baptism, confirmation and absolution are some of the theological "helpmates" we have used for this purpose.

Soelle would see the fated aspect in the fabric of Protestant theology much in the way Daniel Goleman speaks of the "vital lies"<sup>41</sup> that comfort us even as they establish the structures within which we build our lives. Our faith has convinced us of the truth of this theology of fated "Social Darwinism". But, it is not faith alone, but also society and culture that shares the responsibility. Our culture and our traditions create for us the excuses and evidences of the correctness of our beliefs. "...(T)he real problem is that I am living in a world of lies, in which it is impossible to know the truth and act accordingly."<sup>42</sup>

Sin is then seen as the evil of structures of faith and culture that reign over us. It is in her theology of redemption/liberation that we perhaps best understand how this corporate and structural sin becomes personalized. For this we turn to Soelle's exegesis of Romans 6:10-14.

Soelle draws three major conclusions from this passage. The first is that when Paul speaks of our mortal bodies being under the reign of sin's passions, she relates that to our being dependent, depending on our whole existence: our "biology"; our "culture", and its "prevailing ideas"; even our "consumer desires". Paul's "mythological images" of "the power of sin which springs into life, seizes power and rules", illustrates that we are dependent, the victims of the evil dictates of those passions.<sup>43</sup>



The second point is that, even though we are dependent, we are not doomed unless we submit to the power of those sinful passions. If we "yield (our) members to sin as instruments of wickedness"(Romans 6:13) we in effect reject God and cling to the reigning power of sin. We therefore cannot remain neutral. We either remain in the grasp of sin, or we reject sin's power in favor of God. For Soelle, this means to take sides with humanity. It means to recognize our bond with life and therefore to seek meaning in life. It is to reject pessimism and despair. "The fact that there is no neutrality in life means that there is nothing between despair/sin on the one hand and practice/faith on the other."<sup>44</sup> It is "humanocentric theological praxis" posited against idealistic, isolated theology.

The third conclusion for Soelle is that the prevalent "anthropological pessimism" of traditional Protestantism is a rejection of the power of Christ to prevail over the power of sin. We are to reject this and instead "...make ourselves the weapons of righteousness, the instruments of peace whom God uses....For we are not subject to the laws of the imperialistic structure of exploitation; we are subject to grace."<sup>45</sup>

Although Soelle emphasizes "Faith as a Struggle Against Objective Cynicism" (the title of chapter 2, CHOOSING LIFE), and the importance of "...our capabilities, our potentialities, our vital energies"<sup>46</sup>, redemption is still more attributed to the grace of Christ as it moves into human life than to human enlightenment.





## Redemption/Liberation and Individual Sins

"As long as we are at home in the system of estrangement and sin we have no full awareness of reality."<sup>47</sup>

It is at this point that we see her understanding of the sins of individuals. If redemption/liberation is accessible through grace that opens our eyes to see and our ears to hear, then the individual obviously becomes responsible for either rejecting or accepting that opportunity. However, a critical question has to be asked: Being the victim of sinful structures, of evil lies that form my vision, how can the individual then know this choice exists?

I wish to retreat to Paul Ricoeur to help answer this question in Soelle. Ricoeur refers to the three dimensions of symbolism as the cosmic, the oneiric and the poetic.<sup>48</sup> The poetic dimensions of the religious symbols that Soelle addresses (redemption, grace, the power of sin to reign over us) expresses what Ricoeur calls "...to manifest the sacred on the cosmos and (thus) to manifest it in the "psyche".<sup>49</sup> This "double regression"<sup>50</sup> into both the inner self and into humanity ties together personal and cosmic sacredness. Soelle suggests that the traditional Protestant Christian faith creates a personal theology divorced from connectedness. The individual, enslaved to the power of sin, can only seek redemption in isolation. He or she is, in Luther's understanding, still wretched, but forgiven. Restricted individual human capacity becomes restricted universal capacity.

How then does this resolve the question of how I may know that a choice exists? By changing the symbols. Redemption becomes liberation. Soelle suggests that this was Paul's intention. The Church, convinced



of human defilement, simply used convenient exegesis to create symbols of such a pessimistic world view. We are liberated from sin's power and set free to become the people we should be. True to the general hermeneutic approach of liberation theology, Soelle sends us back to the Bible itself to seek new symbols: symbols of God's solidarity with sinners; symbols of God's love toward those oppressed by the forces of sin. If redemption becomes liberation, it is liberation from sin's power and to God's power.

If liberation symbols and images are imposed on Biblical ideas of redemption, we see a choice offered to us: to remain under the power of sin; or, to opt for a life in the power of God. (It is important to understand that "power" is a word Soelle uses cautiously because of its misuse to relate our relationship with God to traditional power/dominance roles of males to females. She refers to a power of sin to reign over us - but of the power of God to reign in and through us.)<sup>51</sup>

In her chapter on "Cross and Liberation" from CHOOSING LIFE, Soelle moves from the nature of the act of redemption and liberation to the meaning of living redeemed, and thus liberated. If the power of sin and evil can be overcome, how then should we live?

I closed my last lecture by pointing to the cross, the place where Christians stand when they begin to be aware of the civilization of injustice, and of estrangement as sin. The cross teaches us to perceive sin. In the discipleship of the man who was tortured to death, we learn to understand our own lives."<sup>52</sup>

One element vital to Soelle's vision of the redeemed person is that of a "shared vision". "Without this shared vision it would be impossible to take up the cross. It is this vision which is our strength."<sup>53</sup> For Soelle the shared life is the redeemed life; the



redeemed life is shared. "What can't be shared isn't worth possessing."<sup>54</sup> It is in living for and in others, and including them in our lives that we live redeemed. Taking her cue from the Hymn "At the Cross, At the Cross", Soelle says "It is the cross....where we experience the light and are freed from our fears. The burden of sin, our powerlessness in estrangement, rolls away from our hearts. At the cross.... we receive our life's perspectives."<sup>55</sup>

And so, we have moved from estrangement as sin and structures of estrangement as evil, to redemption as liberation, and back to estrangement which is put aside through redemption/liberation. We see the creation story as Soelle re-interpreted it for us, completed in Christ. As Eve is credited with helping us discover from the tree that knowledge would not kill us, Christ becomes the one who enables us to "...participate more fully in life and so eat from the tree of life."<sup>56</sup>

Soelle sees salvation as redemption from the oppressive power of sin for the individual in relational context. She sees theology as contextually induced to establish praxis. This praxis may or may not be relevant to baptismal instruction or communion ritual. It may or may not deal with "the essence of being". But, it surely demands a vision, if not of ultimacy, at least of a future beyond personal, sexual, economic, racial and political oppression.

### III. Vision From a Feminist Perspective

Like Lynn Nell Rhodes Soelle sees faith demanding a vision, a vision shaped by a theology conscious of both the individual's





liberation from sin and the requisite identification with all who are oppressed by the sins of sexual, economic, racial and political oppression. Rhodes, however, insists that vital to this change of vision is a clarification of roles of ministry and mission. This role, traditionally defined by white males, has undergone both change and confusion by elements ranging from the increased presence of women in ministry to the similar increase of women in the theological educational system where styles of ministry and theologies of mission are formulated.

Rhodes emphasizes the need to recover, or rediscover, the female experience within the Church's tradition. That experience, generally overlooked or downplayed, is vital in establishing that women are in fact co-creators and co-participators in that tradition. She discusses how essential it is that women learn to "name" their own questions and concerns. This is crucial to the female identity as women move through the processes of ordination that have been developed and dominated for twenty centuries by males.

As Rhodes moves from basic themes to the actual practice of ministry within the feminist tradition she considers the impact of women, power and authority as they have become key issues for mission. She insists that the female experience must become a part of the foundation of the Church's understanding of its mission, and thus its ministry. The "calling out" of all Christians in a diverse and pluralistic world to be participators in the body of faith, with all sharing the responsibility for the creation of themes of mission; these become the Church's concern as they are projected through women's concerns.<sup>57</sup>



Rhodes considers these themes of authority, vocation, experience and mission vital to her proposition that "The purpose of Christian Ministry is to work toward the creation of a new humanity and a new earth."<sup>58</sup> For Rhodes the context of salvation and the necessity of a vision for the new creation are two closely connected issues.

Looking first at the "context of salvation", Rhodes sees salvation not so much an individual experience as it is the experience of an individual within the context of the faith community. For the Church to be able to proclaim its doctrines, its bases for authority and its creeds, it must be a Church that hears and identifies itself with the salvation experience of all its people. Secondly, salvation means "new creation". She quotes Rosemary Radford Ruether (A RELIGION FOR WOMEN) "...the primary vision of salvation in the Bible is that of an alternative future, specifically a new society of peace and justice that requires the overthrow of present systems of injustice."<sup>59</sup>

The Church must develop a clear vision of that new creation, a creation in which the causes, concerns and identities of all people, regardless of sex, race or faith traditions become highly valued, intrinsic parts. This new vision, perhaps utopian in nature, should be intended to move us toward the new world by changing the present world. Developing a praxis, a combination of vision, ideology and method requires giving credence to the role of women ("herstory") in the development of the Christian Church and to culture in general.

When Rhodes established the context of "white women liberation/feminist theologians"<sup>60</sup> she was pointing us toward the pivotal role played by women between context and vision. White women are both the oppressed ("unpaid labor in the reproductive system and



....surplus labor in the productive system"<sup>61</sup>), and the oppressors.

White women share in the corporate guilt of racism and oppression while themselves being the oppressed! White women share with all women the fact that traditional female characteristics and attributes have been put down by a male-oriented society. The gifts of nurturing, care and emotion, subordinated by that male dominated world, must become vital tools for men and women in the mission ideology required by a vision of a new creation. Additionally, the female experience of oppression becomes vital to a mission ideology of solidarity with the oppressed.

"Mission activity is always strategic, contextual and practical."<sup>62</sup> It has meaning and purpose; it has a vision; and, it occurs in a relational context, not in isolation. To be strategic, it must have a vision. We cannot plot a course if we do not know where we are going! To be contextual, we must seek solidarity with all of creation. This requires hearing and giving credence to the life and salvation experiences of all. If the Church can accomplish strategy and context through vision and solidarity, its practicality will be evident.

In these two issues of vision and "context of salvation" Rhodes offers a practical way for the whole Church to rediscover the valuable role of women in reshaping the Church's mission. By giving credence (and thus authority) to that role the Church can come to see itself in a more pluralistic and diverse way. Gaining that type of vision of the present will enable us to better envision, and then shape the "new creation" of the future. Thus, a new vision of the impact of the experiences of all oppressed persons can help create a new mission ideology of nurture and empowerment vital to that "new creation".





## CONCLUSION

Religion in America has evolved out of a male-dominated culture. That's not news. It has been a long time in human history since matriarchy was the dominant form of tribal societies. In fact, ever since men learned that they actually do have a role in procreation, they have been moving slowly, but ever so surely, toward creating a society dominated by male ideas, images and language. The religion that has evolved in American culture couldn't help becoming patriarchal.

So where do we go from here? First we listen. Perhaps the radical feminist Mary Daly is not so far off base when she refuses to allow men to ask questions in her lectures. Maybe men have said enough for a while. How ever much male chauvinists may joke about women talking too much, maybe its time for men to start listening! Perhaps the pendulum of social justice must swing heavily to the side of women long enough for us to be able to move toward a society where a person is not weighed against her or his gender! For now there are stories to be told and changes to be made.

The irony of this is that lifting the oppression from women will be liberating for men. Remember Dorothee Soelle and the way she equated redemption to liberation? Men have long been under the burden of sin. We have sinned in not hearing women. We have sinned by not admitting our fear of them. We have sinned by using their bodies and justifying it by denigrating their intelligence. "Dumb broads' became the insidious justification of male oppressiveness. We could not be guilty of mistreating those who are "obviously" inferior to us! We made the rules, defined the categories and even created the language we use to



identify and characterize life. In carrying "the burden" of human societal development, men have also carried "the burden" of their own sins against women, and thus against humanity.

Imagine now with Lynn Nell Rhodes a new society created from a vision of life as it could be. Imagine a Church that hears all its people and speaks a new language that heals and uplifts. It is precisely this vision that needs to impact the faith that moves religion in America.

I would suppose that the first place to start would be with theological education. Perhaps to a significant degree the amount of impact feminist theology will have on religion in America depends on how extensively courses in feminist and womanist theology will come to permeate our seminaries. I know it is difficult to perceive of certain faith groups incorporating serious feminist/womanist readings into their theology curriculum. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine how many other faith groups with broader theological understandings could allow seminary students to graduate without significant exposure to feminist and womanist theology.

The way in which theological education deals with this issue will have a great impact on the way the Church deals with it. Theologically trained church leaders, in concert with feminists from both the academic and mainstream religious communities, must work toward creating an environment where learning and growth can occur within a pastoral context. Not everybody is excited about inclusive language, revisioning of history or changing of symbols in the Church!

The feminist agenda cuts across virtually every issue of relational theology; solidarity and oppression, personality and faith



development, family life, faith and sexuality, religious education, and even the language we use to speak and sing our theology. The way the American Religious community deals with (or fails to deal with) this issue may likely have more effect on its future than any issue it has ever dealt with before. The feminist issue will be, as Dr. Thomas Thangaraj termed it in his course "Trends in Ecumenical Theology - M 315", the "Copernican Turn" for the Christian Church, and thus for all Religion in America.





## ENDNOTES

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